

Academic Freedom Worldwide and the Resolution Before the AHA:
A White Paper from the Alliance for Academic Freedom

On January 9, 2016, a resolution will come before the business meeting of the American Historical Association calling on the scholarly organization “to monitor Israeli actions that restrict the right to education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.” With its exclusive focus on Israel, the resolution logically implies that the infringements of academic freedom that occur in the Occupied Territories are uniquely worthy of concern from the AHA. The resolution can be found here: <http://www.historians.org/annual-meeting/business-meeting/resolution-to-be-considered-at-the-january-2016-business-meeting>.

The AAF believes that this resolution should be defeated. It is well documented that scores of nations around the globe regularly infringe on education rights and academic freedom in ways that warrant at least as much attention as Israel’s actions. If the AHA or any organization of American scholars is to commit itself to monitoring foreign governments’ actions that affect education, it must do so in a way that is fair and commensurate with the problems. “Rather than defending ‘the rights of American historians to travel to all foreign countries in order to study, teach, pursue research or simply carry on discussions with other historians’ as the AHA’s “Guiding Principles on Taking a Public Stance” call for, the resolution wrongly selects only one country to be monitored by the AHA.¹

The members of the AAF are self-identified liberals and progressives who have been critical, individually and collectively, of Israeli policies toward the Palestinian people and supportive of Palestinian as well as Jewish national aspirations. We reject the all-too-common binary approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict that seeks to justify one side or the other as all right or all wrong, and sets out to marshal supposed evidence to prove a case of complete guilt or total exoneration. Scholarship and fairness require a more difficult and thoughtful approach. As academics we recognize the subjective perspectives of individuals and peoples, but strive to apply rigorous standards to research and analysis rather than to subsume academic discipline to political expediency.

Academic Freedom: Serious Assault Around the Globe

Given the dire state of academic freedom around the world, Israel would not strike a reasonable observer as the proper place for an American scholarly society to train its focus. Many countries exhibit a complete disregard for the principles of academic freedom. Countries such as China, Russia, and many Arab nations are known to expel, imprison, and otherwise punish students and scholars simply for the nature of their research or their political views. Some deny education to whole classes of citizens, such as women. Organizations that issue annual reports, such as Freedom House and the U.S. State Department, do not place Israel among the leading offenders.²

¹ “Guiding Principles on Taking a Public Stance,” *Perspectives*, American Historical Association, March 2007. AHA website.

² See, for example, John F. Kerry, “Secretary’s Preface,” U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper> Kerry’s letter cited China, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand.

China, for example, is well known for its flagrant disregard of the right to unfettered learning. It practices state censorship, imprisons dissidents, and places severe restrictions on educational publication and discussion. Universities dismiss scholars for heretical beliefs, such as (to name but one recent case) when Peking University dismissed Professor Xia Yeliang, an economist and free market advocate, for his beliefs,³ or when Wang Peijian, a law professor and democracy advocate at Jiliang University in Zhejiang Province, was compelled against his will to attend a “psychiatric facility” because he shared his political views on the campus.⁴ Yet despite these restrictions, dozens of American universities are starting campuses, programs, or collaborations in China, and American administrators have frequently turned a blind eye to China’s contempt for academic freedom. One Johns Hopkins administrator told a reporter for *The Daily Beast* that its center in Nanjing would be respectful of the hosts’ wishes, stating “we are not trying to be instigators in sensitive areas. The mission of the center is to build better relations with the Chinese, so we’re not going to stir that up.” This sensitivity would include agreeing not to invite people like the Dalai Lama or the artist Ai Weiwei. Orville Schell of the Asia Society, noted: “One has to pay a price: one has to play by the rules of China’s game, and a university committed to academic freedom is bound to run into problems,” adding that they have to “either make accommodations or do without” the campus.⁵ In any ranking of nations warranting concern from American academics, China would seem to rate at the top of the list.

Iran is also a well-known case. It is notorious the world over for the parlous state of academic freedom. In 2012, seventeen human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, [issued a report](#) decrying what they called “the alarming state of academic freedom in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” The report pointed to “violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly on campuses; and institutionalized procedures that allow authorities arbitrarily to expel and suspend students, and fire graduate instructors on the basis of their political views or activities.” The report further noted that “over six hundred students, as well as some university lecturers, have been arrested since 2009, many of whom have subsequently been imprisoned, and hundreds deprived of education, as a result of their political activities.”⁶ In addition, the academic opportunities of women in Iran have been egregiously abridged. In September 2012, some thirty Iranian universities enacted new rules banning women from eight different degree courses, including engineering, nuclear physics, computer science, English literature, archaeology and business.⁷

Most recently, we have the case of the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS. ISIS shocked the world when it destroyed valuable historical antiquities in Iraq and Syria. The destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra was deemed by UNESCO to be “a new war crime and an immense loss for the Syrian people and for humanity.”⁸ More shockingly still, ISIS publicly beheaded Khalid al-Asaad, the retired 83-year-old chief archaeologist of the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra, known and beloved for the custody of Palmyra’s majestic ancient history. According

³ Chris Buckley, “[Outspoken Chinese Professor Says He Was Dismissed](#),” *New York Times*, October 19, 2013.

⁴ “[Surveillance, Psychiatric Detention Limit Academic Freedom](#),” *China Media Bulletin*, 77, Freedom House, December 14, 2012.

⁵ Isaac Stone Fish, “[No Academic Freedom for China](#),” *The Daily Beast*, November 22, 2011.

⁶ Human Rights Watch Report: “[Iran: Government Assault on Academic Freedom: Students, Faculty Expelled, Imprisoned for Political Views](#),” May 31, 2012.

⁷ Fariba Sahraei, “[Iranian University Bans on Women Causes Consternation](#),” *BBC News*, September 22, 2012.

⁸ Anne Barnard, “[ISIS Speeds Up Destruction of Antiquities in Syria](#),” *New York Times*, August 24, 2015.

to reports, “His blood-soaked body was then suspended with red twine by its wrists from a traffic light, his head resting on the ground between his feet, his glasses still on.”⁹ This, too, represents a crime against history. Just a few years ago, the African militant group Ansar Dine’s outright destruction of centuries-old shrines in Timbuktu, which are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, elicited no protest from the AHA.¹⁰

Not only nakedly authoritarian regimes violate the norms of academic freedom. Countries that call themselves democracies, such as Singapore and Turkey, routinely restrict it in egregious ways, as when Turkey jailed the political scientist Busra Ersanli for her political views.¹¹ The Scholars at Risk Network, which monitors academic freedom violations worldwide, has noted problems in democracies such as India, South Africa, and South Korea, to name just a few.¹² Indeed, among more than fifty incidents reported by Scholars at Risk in 2015, multiple incidents occurred in such countries as Thailand, Burma, Egypt, the UAE, Pakistan, and Kenya. None were reported in Israel, while one incident was reported in the Palestinian Territories, committed by officials of the Palestinian Authority.

Some people have argued that Israel deserves special scrutiny because it receives foreign aid from the U.S. On this logic, Afghanistan, the largest recipient of U.S. aid, should also be monitored, especially given the systemic obstacles to educational opportunity there, including the systematic exclusion of women and continued violence.¹³ On this logic, too, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian governments, also large recipients of U.S. foreign aid, should be monitored. So too should Kenya, Pakistan, and Indonesia. In addition, the United States conducted [\\$579 billion in trade with China](#) in 2014, according to the Office of the United States Trade Representative.¹⁴ It conducted [\\$81 billion in trade with Saudi Arabia](#) in 2012, according to the same office.¹⁵ These figures dwarf what the U.S. gives in direct aid to Israel and does a great deal to sustain these nation’s economies.

Any resolution adopted by the AHA, or any other academic professional society, should take into account the severity and frequency of restrictions on education and scholarship not only in Israel but in these numerous other countries where voices have been raised in protest.

The Question of Freedom to Travel

⁹ Ben Hubbard, “[Syrian Expert Who Shielded Palmyra Antiquities Meets a Grisly Death at ISIS’ Hands](#),” *New York Times*, August 19, 2015.

¹⁰ Tiemoko Diallo and Adama Diarra, “[Mali Islamists Attack UNESCO Holy Site in Timbuktu](#),” Reuters, May 5, 2012.

¹¹ Cat Lucas, “[Turkey Focus, 2013](#),” English PEN, April 12, 2013.

¹² See, for example, Jess C. Scott, “[Academic Freedom in Singapore?](#)” *The Online Citizen*, February 23, 2014; Chun Han Wong, “[Singapore Professor Denied Tenure, Sparks Academic Freedom Debate](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2013.

¹³ See, for example, “[Violence, Tradition Keep Millions of Afghans from School](#),” *Reuters*, January 1, 2011; or, more recently, “[Dedication to Education Forced Teacher to Flee Violence in Afghanistan](#),” International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, December 2, 2015.

¹⁴ “U.S.-China Trade Facts,” Office of the United States Trade Representative, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>, April 4, 2014.

¹⁵ “U.S.-Saudi Arabia Trade Facts,” Office of the United States Trade Representative, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-east/north-africa/saudi-arabia>, May 6, 2014.

One issue highlighted by the resolution coming before the AHA is that of freedom to travel to pursue research or studies or to participate in conferences. This freedom is severely restricted by many countries. Some nations bar entry or exit to individuals based on their political views, their religion, or their national identities. (Roughly 20 countries bar admission to holders of Israeli passports.) These practices are widespread throughout much of the world, although they have not thus far occasioned outcry from the groups and individuals that are pressing the AHA to take a stand against Israel.

Again, China constitutes a prominent example. China routinely denies visas to foreign scholars for political reasons. Among these are such eminent China scholars as Andrew Nathan of Columbia University, Perry Link of the University of California at Riverside, Elliot Sperling of Indiana University, and many others. Nathan and Link edited *The Tiananmen Papers*, while Sperling was an advocate for the Chinese economics professor and dissident Ilham Tohti.¹⁶ China also severely restricts its citizens' movement within the country. For example, people who live in urban areas that do not have a "hukou," or internal passport, are forever designated "temporary residents" and, as the *Washington Post* reported, cannot enjoy such benefits as "subsidized public housing, public education beyond elementary school, public medical insurance and government welfare payments." Those lacking this registration are required to return to their hometowns for many purposes, including to take the national university entrance exam.¹⁷

In 2014 and 2015 Russia expelled multiple foreign scholars. In some cases police and immigration officials physically removed these scholars as they conducted research in state archives. Others were punished with fines.¹⁸ Academics in recent years have also faced politically motivated state-sanctioned disruptions of travel in such countries as Ukraine¹⁹ and even the United Kingdom.²⁰

Around the Arab world, the freedom to travel for scholarly purposes remains an acute problem. In December 2014, Egypt barred entry to Michelle Dunne, a senior researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Dunne, who was traveling to a conference in Egypt, was known to be critical of the authoritarian government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Also, in July 2015, a French master's student in political sociology at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris who was studying in Egypt, was arrested and had her phone and computer confiscated. She then had her visa revoked and was deported. The reason was that she was conducting research about a banned political group called

¹⁶ Edward Wong, "[China Denies Entry to an American Scholar Who Spoke Up for a Uighur Colleague](#)," New York Times, July 7, 2014.

¹⁷ Keith B. Richburg, "[China 'Hukou' System Deemed Outdated as Way of Controlling Access to Services](#)," Washington Post, August, 15 2010.

¹⁸ Carl Schreck, "[Western Scholars Alarmed by Russian Deportations and Fines](#)," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 31, 2015. Russia also tries to silence research it dislikes for political reasons. A well-known recent case involves the Centre for Independent Social Research, an organization that promotes sociological research. The Russian Ministry of Justice's Saint Petersburg Office has demanded that CISR register as a foreign agent because of its criticisms of some Russian legislation and its work on problems existing in Russia today. See, for example, the petition in support of CISR posted at <http://cistr.ru/en/support/>.

¹⁹ Roman Olearchyk, "[Businessmen and Academics Denied Entry to Ukraine](#)," Cnbc.com, December 23, 2013.

²⁰ "[Respected Academic Denied Entry into UK](#)," *Impact: The University of Nottingham's Official Student Magazine*, November 4, 2013.

the April 6 youth movement.²¹ Several Egyptian dissidents have themselves felt compelled to flee the country or had their movement restricted. Emad el-Din Shahin, an Egyptian political scientist, escaped from Egypt after the government charged him with espionage and sentenced him to death; he now teaches at Georgetown. Amr Hamzawy, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo, was charged with insulting the judiciary and barred from travel.²²

In March 2015, officials of the United Arab Emirates blocked Professor Andrew Ross of New York University boarding a plane headed for Abu Dhabi, ostensibly for security concerns. Ross has been a vocal critic of NYU's arrangement with its Abu Dhabi campus because of labor practices in the UAE.²³ The UAE has blocked travel in similar fashion for years, bringing condemnation from groups such as Freedom House. In February 2013, Kristian Ulrichsen of the London School of Economics sought to present a paper in the UAE about recent protests in nearby Bahrain. His own university co-organized the event. But Emirati authorities insisted that his paper be removed from the program. When Ulrichsen traveled to Dubai for a talk at another university, he was barred from entering the country. Officials stated that his exclusion was due to his "unhelpful" views "delegitimizing the Bahraini monarchy."²⁴

In September 2015, Professor Maati Monjib, a Moroccan historian and journalist, was prevented from leaving his country to attend conferences in Barcelona, Spain, and Lillehammer, Norway. He began a hunger strike from which he collapsed. He was also effectively forced to close his institute for investigative journalism.²⁵

Some scholars believe that the problems in the Arab world are getting worse, not better. According to Al-Fanar Media, the hope of openness occasioned by the Arab uprisings four years has given way to "a climate of increased repression and paranoia." This fall, foreign scholars reported concern about losing access to the countries that they study if they venture into delicate areas or express critical judgments of state policies.²⁶

More generally, many Arab states bar entry to anyone with an Israeli passport or even an Israeli stamp in a foreign passport. Just recently, Kuwait Airways was found to have acted illegally by refusing to sell a ticket to an Israeli citizen. In order to avoid compliance with American law, Kuwait Airways eliminated its service between New York and London.²⁷

²¹ David D. Kirkpatrick, "[Egypt Denies Entry to American Scholar Critical of Its Government](#)," *New York Times*, December 13, 2014; Emir Nader, "[French Student Arrested, Deported from Egypt for Researching 6 April](#)," *Daily News Egypt*, July 7, 2015.

²² David D. Kirkpatrick, "[Egypt Denies Entry to American Scholar Critical of Its Government](#)," *New York Times*, December 13, 2014; Emad el-Din Shahin, "[Sentenced to Death in Egypt](#)," *The Atlantic*, May 19, 2015.

²³ Stephanie Saul, "[N.Y.U. Professor Is Barred by United Arab Emirates](#)," *New York Times*, March 16, 2015.

²⁴ Scott Jaschik, "[Scholar Detained, Meeting Aborted](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 25, 2013; https://freedomhouse.org/article/uae-uses-travel-bans-stifle-dissent#_VJm2714DXs

²⁵ Aziz el-Yaakoubi, "[Moroccan Intellectual Collapses after Hunger Strike over Ban](#)," *Reuters*, October 14, 2015.

²⁶ Ursula Lindsey, "[The Door for Many Middle East Scholars is Slamming Shut](#)," *Al-Fanar Media*, October 27, 2015.

²⁷ "[Kuwait Airways Drops New York-London Route After U.S. Orders It Allows Israelis to Fly](#)," *Haaretz*, December 16, 2015.

Freedom to travel in order to pursue scholarship and education is indeed an important right. To have credibility and moral authority, any resolution adopted by the AHA should consider what restrictions exist in all kinds of countries around the world.

The Question of Protests or Violence on Campuses

Another issue highlighted by the resolution before the AHA is the military's use of force on college campuses. On this matter, the resolution's claims raise serious questions as to their accuracy. (See the document, *A Flawed Resolution: Errors, Misrepresentations, and Omissions in the Resolution Before the AHA.*) Whatever the facts in the Israeli cases, though, it is important to note that cases of equal or far greater severity involving the use of police force on campuses have occurred in recent years in other countries.

South African police, for example, have very recently been faulted for using force against campus protests. According to Scholars at Risk, on November 11, 2015, at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa, weeks of student protests culminated in "attacks on security personnel and students," damaging university property. "Protesters reportedly disrupted exams, set university buildings on fire, attacked security guards, and looted a cafeteria, leading to confrontations with police and multiple student arrests."

Venezuelan authorities have also frequently resorted to violence to suppress student activity. According to the Scholars at Risk network, for example, on April 3, 2014, at Central University of Venezuela, Caracas, government troops prohibited students from marching to a government office to protest the economic crisis. Troops fired tear gas and flash grenades, while masked pro-government vigilantes brutally assaulted students on the campus grounds with metal pipes and rods, causing several students to be hospitalized. The protest was part of a larger series of demonstrations in which some 35 people were killed.

Smaller countries also use police or military force to shut down student protests. In March 2015, students in Myanmar were arrested and charged with rioting and other offenses after protests against a new higher education law that they alleged would significantly reduce academic freedom in the country—part of a series of brutal crackdowns on students. On April 30, 2015, after student protests at the Université du Burundi against the president's decision to seek a third term, the government's Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research summarily shuttered student dormitories, leaving hundreds of students with no place to live. Many other examples are listed from nations worldwide on the Scholars at Risk website.²⁸

Any resolution about the use of state force on college campus should consider how often this occurs in other countries and how much damage and injury is done.

Academic Freedom Denied by Palestinian Governments

The resolution before the AHA focuses on Israel's restrictions on education in its highly charged, long-running conflict with the Palestinians. This conflict is complex and multi-sided, with

²⁸ The cited cases from the paragraphs above can all be found at the Academic Freedom Monitor website of the Scholars at Risk Network, <http://www.monitoring.academicfreedom.info/>.

grievances and justifications on both sides. Any resolution should take into account that academic freedom and access to education are also routinely restricted by Hamas in Gaza and by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. For example, in 2013, Hamas set forth a punishment of 10 years in prison for anyone receiving aid designed to encourage the normalization of ties with Israel.²⁹ It also has tightly restricted travel, preventing Palestinians from leaving Gaza. In recent years, it has forbidden freelance journalists, human rights workers, and students from crossing into Israel.³⁰ In December 2014, Hamas turned back 37 young war orphans from Gaza who were seeking to visit Israel for a peace-building conference.³¹ The resolution does not condemn Hamas's role in restricting student travel.

The Palestinian Authority has also infringed on academic freedom. Human Rights Watch reported that in April and May 2015, at Birzeit University in the West Bank, PA security forces violently arrested, detained and questioned students aligned with Hamas when they prevailed in student council elections. Others had been arrested in the preceding months because of their political opinions, according to Human Rights Watch.³² In 2014, a Palestinian professor of political science at al-Quds University, Mohammed S. Dajani, resigned after encountering intimidation, accusations of treason, and death threats for having led a trip of Palestinian students to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp.³³ The resolution does not condemn the PA's infringements on academic freedom or educational opportunity.

If academic freedom is to be monitored in Israel and the Occupied Territories, it would only make sense to consider infringements committed by all parties to the conflict.

Monitoring Academic Freedom: Whose Job?

Infringements on academic freedom and restrictions on access to education are problems that afflict almost every nation on earth. There is no compelling reason to select Israel alone to be monitored by the American Historical Association. It is not unique even among democracies or recipients of U.S. foreign aid. If the AHA is to be tasked with monitoring such infringements in a principled fashion, it must do so wherever these problems arise.

This raises the question, of course, of resources such as time, money, and manpower. Given the magnitude of the effort, we believe it is not feasible for the AHA or other professional organizations in American higher education to take on such a task. What the AHA can do is to continue to affiliate with organizations such as the Scholars at Risk network that are already engaged in the project of monitoring academic freedom worldwide. It might also encourage AHA members to affiliate individually with SAR, financially assist the organization, and persuade their home institutions to associate with SAR as well.

²⁹ Fares Akram, "[Hamas Adds Restrictions on Schools and Israelis](#)," *New York Times*, April 1, 2013.

³⁰ Abeer Ayyoub, "[Hamas Restricts Travel for Gazans](#)," *Al-Monitor*, March 21, 2013; Elhanan Miller, "[Hamas Imposes Restrictions Keeping Gazans in Strip](#)," *Times of Israel*, March 3, 2013.

³¹ Isabel Kershner and Majd al-Waheidi, "[Hamas Turns Back 37 Gaza War Orphans From a Bridge-Building Trip to Israel](#)," *New York Times*, December 28, 2014.

³² "[Palestine: Students Detained for Political Opinions](#)," Human Rights Watch report, May 7, 2015; Jonathan Brown, "[Detentions of Hamas-Aligned Students 'Deeply Worrying'](#)," *Al-Jazeera*, May 10, 2015.

³³ Ian Black, "[Palestinian Professor: No Regrets over Taking Students to Auschwitz](#)," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2014.